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Foregrounding Alternative Sexuality: A Comparative Study of Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes*

Abstract

Alternative Sexuality and Queer both refer to alternate patterns of sexual behaviors that are not accepted in the society. Alternative Sexuality refers to “behaviors, identities and communities that stand in contrast and/or opposition to socially and culturally dominant sexuality(ies)”-*heteronormativity* (emphasis added). The societal attempt of codifying ‘heterosexuality’ as a norm, unveils the murky power of dominance. Alternative Sexuality challenges the concept and Alternative Sexual Practice makes. In the society alternate or queer sexual practices like homosexuality (lesbianism and gay sexuality), bisexuality and transsexuality, which are, in short, termed as LGBT, are viewed as aberration.

Mahesh Dattani once remarked, “Being gay in India is still a huge taboo”. Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a successful protest play trying to decentralize the hegemony of ‘heteronormativity’ and normalize homosexuality. *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner is a critique of the American society which politically ostracized the LGBT communities accusing them for spreading AIDS and other venereal diseases during the 80s and 90s. This

paper is also an attempt to interrogate what Alternative Sexuality is and how both the playwrights Tony Kushner and Mahesh Dattani have utilized this theme in their respective plays *Angels in America* (1993) and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. The present paper seeks to examine how both Kushner and Dattani in their plays have tried to subvert the dominant heteronormative sexual practice in the society and articulated voices of protest seeking justice in favor of the LGBT communities.

Keywords: Alternative Sexuality, Marginality, Resistance, Dattani, Tony Kushner, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Angels in America*.

Queer theory concerns itself with any form of sexuality, especially gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, which are considered as pervert, deviant, sick or criminal, a foil of heteronormative sexuality while critically discussing sexuality in cultural texts. Queer cultural studies may be foregrounded as “An attempt to redefine identities and carve out a cultural or political space within the dominant heterosexual paradigm, to simply stop being invisible or the “perverted” or “seek” “other” of heterosexuality” (Nayar 118). The LGBT movement all over the world was said to have began with the Stonewall Riots, which were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community against a police raid on 28th June, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn. The term ‘gay’ originally used to mean “carefree”, “happy”, or “bright and showy”. But its association with homosexuality may be dated as early as the late nineteenth century. In modern English the term “gay” has appeared to refer to the homosexual people, especially gay males, and cultural practices associated with homosexuality. By the end of the twentieth century the term has largely appeared to refer to people who are emotionally and physically attached to members of the same sex. A lesbian is a female homosexual – a female who feels romantic love or sexual desire for other females. The members of American Psychological Association in an article entitled “Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation” narrate that “Sexual orientation falls along a continuum. In other words, someone does not have to be exclusively homosexual or heterosexual, but can be varying degrees of both. Sexual orientation develops across a person’s lifetime – different people realize at different points in their lives that they are heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual” (Glassgold *et al*: 2009). Transgenders are those people who cannot relate their gender identity with their assigned sex. In some cultures the transgendered individuals are classified as belonging to a third gender. Sometimes the term includes cross-dressers also.

A central tenet of the American way of life is 'liberalism' that vows for individual freedom. Ironical, as it may sound, in spite of all these, recently a horrific incident in the United States of America, a Muslim fundamentalist psychopath, named Omar Mateen killed more than 50 gay people by thoughtlessly firing at a gay club in Orlando, U.S.A. before being gunned down by the policemen. This incident reminds us of the painful memory of Stonewall Riot Homosexuality in India is both an act of assertion, celebration, and of fear. Majority of people consider it a kind of criminal offence. Some have raised questions regarding the relevance of the play *Angels in America* in present times. According to them, by specifically addressing the issues of AIDS, gay rights, and the politics of the Reagan era, this play remains confined to the 1990s and is irrelevant to 21st century. But in defense of both Kushner and *Angels in America* it can be said that while AIDS is no longer an immediate death sentence in the West, the epidemic is virtually crippling some countries in Africa. The infrastructure of an entire nation is falling apart as a result of the disease. The fight for gay rights is still going on. In the international socio-political scenario gay marriage is an issue of constant controversy. The recent increasing trend of committing suicides by gay teenagers has once again brought the issue of intolerance against gay community to national attention. In so far as American politics of the Reagan era is concerned, some say that Reagan reshaped the Republican Party and even the Democratic Party in his image, thereby establishing the country into a more conservative mindset which is so deep-seated that some Americans claim that they have never come out of the Reagan era.

Indian society, being conservative in attitude regarding the issue of sexuality, has treated homosexuality and third gender identities not as normal and alternative forms of sexuality but as something 'queer', detestable from times immemorial and in Indian English literature, such topics have been presented as 'taboo', something that should be left untouched, and even if it is touched upon, homosexuals and people of third gender are presented in a way that they are no better than either comic characters or beasts, thus confining themselves no more than stereotypes. Dattani's dealing with the issue of homosexuality and becoming vocal in favour of homosexuals in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* may make it appear that India is a tolerant country to homosexuality. In reality, unfortunately, even according to the 377 section of the Indian Penal Code which was formulated by Lord Macaulay in 1860, alternate patterns of sexual behaviors are not accepted. The section reads thus, "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life,

or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine” (quoted in Paul 65-66). In raising the voice of protest against the marginalization of the homosexuals, Dattani has to be bold enough in struggling with the society. This is evident in the statement he made to Anita Nair, “You love to talk about feminism because in a way that is accepted. But you can’t talk about gay issues because that’s not Indian. That doesn’t happen here” (quoted in Paul 68). In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani presents a group of homosexuals who belong to the urban elite class living in Mumbai, well educated, English speaking and well exposed to the modern world. In the flat of Kamlesh the homosexual man and Deepali, a lesbian and feminist have created an ‘alternative space’. There they shun the outside world and find comfort within their own company. Janaki Nair and Mary E. John in *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* argue that India’s concept of sexuality is influenced by the concept of sexuality of the West as “we cannot but draw upon western theories, since they determine at an unconscious level, the reading practices we bring to bear on our work” (quoted in Paul 65). But in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* what Dattani shows is that gay and lesbianism in India do not emerge as an imitation of its existence in the West, or from the desire to show off. It is something that is innate and that arises spontaneously from human desires. In this play the insecurity among the homosexuals due to their non-acceptance in the society is an important issue to notice. Michael Warner in the book *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* defines the caution of being ‘queer’ as “Every person who comes to queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences” (quoted in Paul 62). One can share the same view with Linda Hutcheon who remarks in her *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “While one might say that ‘gay’ was the name chosen by gay themselves, queer was originally a term of abuse within the dominant discourse...” (quoted in Paul 62). For this, although the homosexuals in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* accept each other’s homosexuality in private domain, they are terribly scared of being ‘found out’. The playwright does not allow his characters to remain in a utopian world and from the beginning one can see that these homosexual people are afraid of the hostile outside world that does not allow them to have an alternative sexuality. John McRae says in

his note on Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* that the harm of being homosexual lies in subjugation and ostracization and he remarks, "The harm now is in the oppression, symbolized throughout by the muggy heat and the failing air con" (46). Dattani has raised voice against this oppression by deliberately subverting the gaze – the usual way of the heterosexual world to look at the homosexual world as 'queer', alien, and hateful. Sharad, a homosexual, watches the activities of a heterosexual couple of the next flat with a pair of binoculars, a symbol of pointed gaze on other. Dattani questions the very aspect of normalcy in sexuality through Sharad's speech, "Oh, my Gawd! Those heterosexuals are at it again!" (53). Since the beginning of the play, Kamlesh is trying to get over with his relationship with Prakash for which he had moved from Bangalore to Mumbai:

Kamlesh: I came to get over a relationship. A relationship... I suppose it was in Bangalore. We have been through the pain of separation... As gay men and women we have all been through that... I deed a cruel thing by loving Sharad to forget Prakash. I have not succeeded and I have hurt someone as wonderful as Sharad. I made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that I was trying to get over. (68)

To what extent the homophobia of the society goes can be grasped from the psychiatrist's attitude towards homosexual Kamlesh. He pretends to understand Kamlesh's agony but has advised him that he will never be happy as a gay man, "It is impossible to change society, he, said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself" (69). The trauma that the homosexuals do suffer due to their non-acceptance in the society compels them to hide their actual sexual identity. So, Bunny says, "Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can't find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage" (70).

John McRae offers an intensive analysis of the characters in his 'Note' as he says, "Of the characters, Sharad and Deepali are comfortable with their sexuality, and have different ways of being gay. Sharad is camp, flaunting; Deepali more restrained, perhaps more stable. Kamlesh is anguished, and Ed the most obvious victim of his own insecurities. Bunny, the TV actor is a rather more traditional Indian gay man – married (he would say happily) while publicly denying his own nature, and Ranjit has taken an easy way out by moving to Europe where he can 'be hhimself' more openly (45).

The homosexual world is also a heterogeneous world, divided into fragments regarding the issues of class and gender. Prakash alias Ed leaves Kamlesh to become straight and to marry a woman only to get acceptance in society. Though *On a Muggy Night in*

Mumbai tells a story of love, sex and betrayal among gay men, what Dattani shows is that no one is a villain and everyone is a victim of the feeling of insecurity due to non-acceptance in society. If these characters have done wrong in their relationships, the society should be placed at the dock of a convict, not these gay people. Bunny Singh boasts of his happy married life. But his pain comes out when he says, "I know. Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me – the real me – are present here in this room. And you all hate me for being such a hypocrite. The people who know me are the people who hate me. That is not such a nice feeling. I have tried to survive ... Actually, it is they who are liberal-minded. They have accepted me in spite of my letting them down so badly. I deny them in public, but I want their love in private. I have never told anyone in so many words that I am telling you now – I am a gay man (103).

Although plays dealing with the theme of homosexuality in American literature are not scanty and there are plays written on gay theme before Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, such as Mac West's *The Drag* (1927) and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934), but the homosexual characters in those abovementioned plays written prior to *Angels in America* have been stereotyped and portrayed within a tragic frame – either these characters have been murdered by other characters or they commit suicide by realizing the fruitlessness of their lives for their 'queer' sexual orientation. Standing within this literary background, Kushner's *Angels in America* is a chastising critique simultaneously of American society, religion, and the politics of the Reagan era.

AIDS, which took the form of an epidemic during 1980s and 90s, is also a big issue in the play. During this period, American society placed the homosexuals on dock for spreading AIDS. It is impossible to appreciate the play without understanding something about the history of the AIDS crisis as well as the broader story of gays and lesbians in America. Although homosexual behavior was there among people irrespective of time and culture, it was only in the twentieth century that homosexuality came to be seen as a criminal offence. In the United States, the modern gay rights movement began after World War II. Gay bars and political organizations existed mostly in secret in the 1950s and 60s, but the Stonewall Riot in 1969 at New York City helped to usher a period of growing openness among gays and greater public acceptance. The first case of AIDS was diagnosed among gay men in 1981 and within ten years more than 100,000 people died of the disease in the U.S.A. alone. In the

early years of the epidemic, ignorance and fear resulted in widespread discrimination against the AIDS patients, and the national media reported the story in a sensational way.

Angels in America opened in Los Angeles in the same week when Bill Clinton, the first presidential candidate openly reached out to lesbian and gay voters. Among the gay audience, the play inevitably became associated with a sense of euphoria and political optimism. Tony Kushner himself spoke of his homosexual identity he realized since his boyhood, "I have fairly clear memories of being gay since I was six. I knew that I felt slightly different than most of the boys I was growing up with. By the time I was eleven there was no doubt. But I was completely in the closet."¹ Kushner did not come out of this closet in terms of his sexuality until his mid-twenties. Undoubtedly, this struggle is part of what fuelled the creation of *Angels in America*. *Angels in America*² can be called one of the most successful plays in exploring the theme of homosexuality in America. All of the major male characters in the play are gay. While Prior is openly gay, Louis sometimes denies his actual sexual orientation publicly because of his conservative Jewish family background. One's background in which one is brought up plays a major role in forming one's sexual orientation. So, Joe Pitt goes through the biggest struggle with his sexual identity because his conservative background taught him to consider homosexuality as a sin and he always has wrestled with the way he feels inside. When Joe, disturbed with his dilemma, calls Hanna and says, "Mom. Momma. I'm a homosexual, Momma." (*Millennium Approaches* 81), Hanna is shocked.

Joe and his wife, Harper, do not lead a happy conjugal life. Harper does not understand the real cause of it. She thinks perhaps she cannot make Joe happy on bed. Joe's indifference towards Harper makes her say that he is not the only one who hates sex. She admits, "I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces. It's like a punishment" (*Millennium Approaches* 43). When Joe admits to Harper that their sexual liaison does not make him happy, Harper inquires, out of suspicion, whether he is a gay. Joe gives a positive and shocking answer to Harper's question that he keeps his eyes shut while having sex with her only because he imagines men and not Harper on bed and this shocking revelation indeed shatters Harper. The play clearly shows the damage that is done to the lives of people with both straight and gay sexual orientations where the gay people feel forced to hide their sexuality.

Kushner has subverted the gaze and has questioned the very aspects of normalcy and acceptance. This comes to the light from the conversation between Harper and Prior either in

Prior's dream or in Harper's hallucination because of her valium addiction when Prior tells Harper that he is a gay:

Harper: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

Prior: In my church we don't believe in Mormons. (*Millennium Approaches* 38)

So, acceptance is not something that depends on religion or society. To accept someone does not always depend on individual's perspective. From his conversation with Joe, Louis understands that Joe, the homosexual lawyer, is a gay. Joe later admits that although he wished he would remain gay forever, he could not come to terms with his homosexual identity and had to fight hard to keep it a secret because of societal abhorrence. Joe at last becomes able to come out of the closet. But though he accepts and expresses his actual sexual orientation, his conservative upbringing still makes him feel that being a gay is a sin. So, while touching his homosexual partner Louis for the first time, he becomes hesitant. Joe says, "I ...want to touch you. Can I please just touch you...um, here?" (*Millennium Approaches* 122).

The issue of homophobia is brilliantly and intellectually shown by Kushner. Roy Cohn, who himself is a homosexual, seems to be homophobic and hateful towards homosexuals. When he is informed by his doctor Henry that he has been infected with AIDS because of his homosexual activities, he says:

Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a puissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and whom nobody knows. Who have zero clout. (*Millennium Approaches* 51).

Angels in America talks vividly about love, sex, and betrayal in homosexuality also. Louis, becoming aware that his homosexual partner Prior is suffering from AIDS, leaves Prior. But betrayal is not always a bad thing. Throughout the play, characters turn their backs on ideas that have made their lives unhappy. But one should not forget that this is the nature, innate instinct of every creature to think in favor of its own wellbeing. But Louis is no less emotionally attached to Prior and is guilt-ridden after deserting Prior.

Angels in America is also a commentary on the politics of Reagan era which was notorious for suppressing the homosexuals. Louis in *Angels in America* goes on to talk about how AIDS reveals that there is a limit to tolerance – that underneath it there is hatred. But Prior who refuses to surrender to domination says to himself, "I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong and... (*Millennium Approaches* 123).

Although there is not much temporal difference between Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes* (1993) and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (first performed in 1989), spatially the locales of the plays belong to two different poles of the world. Susan Bassnett in *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* argues that comparative literature "involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literatures across both time and space" (1). Therefore a comparative study between *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Angels in America* reveals how Alternative Sexuality has been treated in both these two texts. *Angels in America* makes no effort to be coy about sex. The characters speak about it openly. The play also presents on-stage sex between Louis and an anonymous man in the park, and every time Prior feels the arrival of the angel, he gets an erection. We should also note that the critics accused the script of *Angels in America* being pornographical, and actors performing the play onstage even were threatened with confinement. The frank dealing of the play with sexuality definitely makes it fit for mature audience, but the play's radical theme, beautiful language, and the attempt of probing deep into human condition and psyche are no doubt important. Mahesh Dattani is also a rebel in openly critiquing society for the marginalization of homosexuals in a conservative Indian context, where, as Amar Nath Prasad remarks, "In spite of the fact that in India homosexuality is slowly gaining acceptance, gay relationships are still stigmatized as unconventional and unnatural and therefore often hidden under a shroud of privacy" (quoted in Nigam and Nityanandam 508). In Dattani's play, while the gay world is fragmented by love, sex and betrayal, the lesbian couple Deepali and Tina live a happy life of love, care and understanding. But the message of *Angels in America* is weakened by only presenting gay male characters, instead of including some lesbian female characters as well. In Dattani's play when Prakash and Kamlesh, a homosexual couples, are spending a private time in a park, Prakash's is afraid of being 'found out' and Kamlesh's reply that they are invisible to the heterosexuals, metaphorically hints at their lack of recognition as part of the society. Kushner's play is full of poignant and compassionate portrayals of what it means to be gay in America. In Kushner's play there is an explicit pointing to this non-acceptance because there, homosexuals were even not recognized as citizens of America during the 80s. Dattani's and Kushner's plays respectively are indeed composed in different religio-socio-politico-cultural contexts, but one aspect is same – the issue of non-acceptance and marginalization of the homosexuals in society. Dattani and Kushner may have little divergence in manner of dealing with the issue but both

of them are alike in being crusaders, in creating plays of resistance, and in staging protest in the same way where Dattani's Kamlesh is rejecting the psychiatrist's advice to change his sexual orientation, Kushner's spokesperson, Prior, a rebel and an openly gay person, demands for futurity, for equal rights and most importantly for citizenship for the LGBT people in America. Prior says, "The time has come, we will be citizens" (*Perestroika* 280). This paper can be concluded by giving a reference to society's gradual relaxation and flexibility in terms of the attitude towards the homosexuals. Laurence Senelick's work *Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love 1894-1925*, published in 1999, interrogates performative notion of same-sex plays on stage. Senelick views his work as a primary resistance, a *raison d'être* to resist ghettoizing of the homosexuals in the society and labeling homosexual plays as degenerated arts. Owen Davis, an American playwright once remarked that "Dirty plays always written by women or by effeminate men and always have been" (quoted in Senelick 1). Therefore, a need is felt and perceived among playwrights to glorify and sanctify homosexual writings and also to prove that even same-sex writings and writings dealing with the theme of homosexuality do have the merits to be recognized as good pieces of art. Several playwrights even in India from a long duration of hibernation have come out to speak about the miseries of the homosexuals. The latest example is Sujoy Prosad Chatterjee's Bengali play *Happy Birthday*³. The play witnessed its successful productions at Kolkata during July, 2015 before its premiere at Canada in September, 2015, thus indicating the changing attitude of the Indian society which gradually is advancing towards accepting alternative sexuality.

Notes

1. Tony Kushner discloses his sexual orientation that started developing in him since his boyhood days in a personal interview while talking about the character Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*. For more, see http://articles.latimes.com/1990-05-13/entertainment/ca-410_1_tony-kushner/2 .
2. *Angels in America* is a two-part play. While Part One is called 'Millennium Approaches', Part Two is named 'Perestroika'. The first part of the play *Angels in America* shows that Roy Cohn, a famous lawyer of America, offers his junior lawyer, Joe Pitt an opportunity to work for the Justice departments in Washington, DC. But his wife, Harper is not willing to go to Washington. Prior and Louis are a homosexual couple. Knowing that Prior has AIDS, Louis leaves him. Joe's inner psyche is

continually disturbed for hiding his gay sexual identity. Ultimately he reveals it to his mother Hanna. Tension grows. Harper is all the time absorbed into hallucinations for her valium addiction. At the end of 'Millennium Approaches' an angel comes and declares Prior a prophet. The second part of the play 'Perestroika' is an extended version of the first part. The first reading of the play may reveal that the play is absurdist in tone and there is no proper action and coherence.

3. Sujoy Chatterjee's semi-autobiographical play *Happy Birthday* is about breaking the stereotypes associated with gay people. The title of the play is important as it talks about awakening of self, awakening of spirit from year-long subjugation. The play is about gay emancipation. Written in the form of a monologue, Sujoy himself performs the role of the character Rony in this solo play. The play was performed at Kolkata between 15th July and 17th July and received positive reviews indicating society's changing attitude towards homosexuality. For more, see <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bengali/theatre/Sujoys-play-to-explore-real-life-experiences-of-abuse-and-exploitation/articleshow/47841103.cms>.

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